DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 860 CS 216 374

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TITLE Improving Student Writing through a Language Rich Environment.
PUB DATE 1998-05-00
NOTE 61p.; M.A. Action Research Project, Saint Xavier University and IRI/Skylight.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses (040) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Action Research; *Classroom Environment; Classroom Techniques; Elementary Education; *Language Enrichment; *Peer Influence; Skill Development; Student Improvement; Vocabulary; *Writing Attitudes; *Writing Improvement; Writing Processes; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Motivation

ABSTRACT

A program developed interventions for improving student writing in the areas of technique and creativity. The targeted population consisted of students in the first through fourth grades in three different school sites, all being similar upper-middle class communities, located in the suburbs of a mid-western city. The problems that some students experienced with written expression were documented through student and teacher surveys and teacher observation checklists. Analysis of probable cause data revealed that students exhibited a limited writing vocabulary, over-concentration on mechanics, resistance to the process of writing, and environmental restraints such as insufficient time and an inappropriate writing climate. A review of solution strategies suggested by the literature resulted in the selection of three major categories of intervention: enriching the language environment; creating settings that motivate student writing; and collaboration through peer counseling. Post-intervention data indicated a positive change in students' perceptions of themselves as writers. Student writing at all sites showed gains in the areas of vocabulary and process skills. The students responded positively to an enriched writing climate. (Contains 9 tables of data and 31 references; sample forms--a teacher writing survey, a student writing survey, and an observation checklist--are appended.) (Author/CR)

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ED 420 860

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IMPROVING STUDENT WRITING THROUGH A LANGUAGE RICH ENVIRONMENT

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An Action Research Project

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching and Leadership

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Field-Based Masters Program

Chicago, Illinois

May, 1998

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ABSTRACT

This report describes interventions for improving student writing in the areas of technique and creativity. The targeted population consisted of students in the first through fourth grades in three different school sites, all being similar upper-middle class communities, located in the suburbs of a mid-western city. The problems that some students experienced with written expression were documented through student and teacher surveys and teacher observation checklists.

Analysis of probable cause data revealed that students exhibited a limited writing vocabulary, over-concentration on mechanics, resistance to the process of writing, and environmental restraints such as insufficient time and an inappropriate writing climate.

A review of solution strategies suggested by literature resulted in the selection of three major categories of intervention: enriching the language environment, creating settings that motivate student writing, and collaboration through peer conferencing.

Post intervention data indicated a positive change in students' perceptions of themselves as writers. The student writing at all sites showed gains in the areas of vocabulary and process skills. The students responded positively to an enriched writing climate.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 - PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT 1

General Statement of the Problem 1

Immediate Problem Context 1

The Surrounding Community 5

National Context of the Problem 6

CHAPTER 2 - PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION 9

Problem Evidence 9

Probable Causes 18

CHAPTER 3 - THE SOLUTION STRATEGY 21

Literature Review 21

Project Objectives and Processes 25

Project Action Plan 26

Methods of Assessment 29

CHAPTER 4 - PROJECT RESULTS 30

Historical Description of the Intervention 30

Presentation and Analysis of Results 35

Conclusions and Recommendations 41

REFERENCES 46

APPENDIX

A TEACHER SURVEY 49

B STUDENT SURVEY 52

C TEACHER CHECKLIST 55

CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of Problem

The students in the targeted first through fifth grade regular and special education classes are experiencing obstacles as writers in terms of technical skills (i.e. vocabulary, mechanics) and creativity (i.e. process and environment). Evidence for the existence of the problem includes a student survey, a teacher survey, and a teacher checklist based on student writing samples.

Immediate Problem Context

This research was conducted in three elementary schools (Sites A, B and C) in a suburban district outside a Midwestern city. Sites A and B are located in the same district (District One), and Site C is located in a second district (District Two). Table 1 shows the Racial/Ethnic background and total enrollment figures for the three schools.

Table 1

Racial/Ethnic Background and Total Enrollment

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/P Islander	Total Enrollment
Site A	92.3%	0.6%	1.5%	5.6%	338
Site B	90.6%	0.2%	0.4%	8.7%	447
Site C	92.6%	0.0%	2.3%	5.0%	258

As seen in Table 1, the student population is predominately white, with the major non-white population being Asian. Black and Hispanic populations are very small. All three schools have kindergarten through fifth grades. The student populations range from 258 to 447.

Table 2 lists information about economic status and Limited-English Proficient Students. Low income students are from families receiving public aid, being supported in foster homes with public funds, or eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches. Limited-English Proficient students are those who have qualified for bilingual education. All three sites have relatively few numbers of students depending on public aid or who have English as a second language.

Table 2

Low-Income and Limited-English Proficient Students

	Low-Income	Limited-English Proficient
Site A	0.3%	7.7%
Site B	0.2%	6.0%
Site C	5.8%	2.3%

The schools in both districts have high rates of attendance (Site A: 96%, Site B: 97.5%, and Site C: 92.6%). Mobility rates and truancy problems are not significant factors in the school climates. Mobility rates for all the schools range from 6.3 % to 7.7%. There are no chronic truants at any of the sites.

Tables 3 and 4 describe characteristics of teachers and administrators within the two targeted districts. White females comprise the majority of the teaching staff in both districts. The teaching staff of District One has 12.4 years of classroom

experience. In this district, the pupil-teacher ratio is 13 to 1, which includes all staff and support personnel. In both districts, a little less than half are at a Master's level or beyond educationally. In District Two, the teaching staff has an average of 13.9 years of experience. The pupil-teacher ratio is 17:1, which also includes all staff and support personnel. District One consists of 1,608 students, while District Two's student population is 4,450.

Table 3

Teachers by Racial/Ethnic Background and Gender

District	White	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	Male	Female	Total
1	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	11.9%	88.1%	142
2	98.6%	0.7%	0.7%	13.8%	86.2%	292

Table 4

Teacher/Administrator Characteristics

Dist.	Average Teaching Experience	Teachers with Bachelor's Degree	Teachers with Master's & Above	Pupil-Teacher Ratio Elem.	Pupil-Admin. Ratio
1	12.4 Yrs.	59.7%	40.3%	13:1	146.2:1
2	13.9 Yrs.	52.6%	47.4%	17:1	278.1:1

Both schools in District One are similar. Each school was built in the late sixties and is currently undergoing construction or remodeling. The educational program of these sites attempts to meet the needs of all students. The students in the self-contained classrooms are supported in the areas of speech and English as a Second

Language (ESL), math and reading, and with emotional and behavioral issues. Other special needs students are included or mainstreamed into regular classes, often with the assistance of a one-on-one aide. Many other students benefit from enrichment in Extended Math classes, Junior Great Books, band, and orchestra programs.

In District One, a policy regarding included and mainstreamed students was recently developed. For the 1997 school year, the focus has been shifted to studying gifted students and their needs. The individual schools in the district have addressed the issue of improving writing at all grade levels. In-service workshops have been offered to the staffs of both Site A and Site B.

The strong tax base allows each school to presently have a computer lab staffed with a technical support aide. The technology goal of the district is six computers in all classrooms by 1998. Two computer consultants support this program. There exists a science lab in each building and two district science consultants. Each classroom teacher has an instructional assistant for four hours daily.

Site C is a twenty-seven year old K-5 school that was completely renovated within the last year. During construction, students were relocated to another school in the district. Currently, Site C contains two classrooms of grades kindergarten through third. There are three multi-age four/five classrooms. In addition, there are three self-contained classrooms of Learning Disabled/Behavior Disordered (LD/BD) students. One additional LD teacher and an aide are present to assist the LD students not serviced within the self-contained classrooms. Support personnel include a Physical Education teacher, Music teacher, Art teacher, Learning Center Director and aide, a full-time Speech and Language Pathologist, and a part-time teacher for Limited-English Proficiency students. The local police department presents a safety program for grades one through three and a drug awareness program for grades four and five. Due to increasing population there is limited classroom space.

Issues facing District Two include: increasing student utilization of technology, charter schools, shrinking income due to the tax cap, diminishing scores on state assessments for Reading and Writing, and citizen groups demanding accountability and change. The community is concerned about gangs and the anti-social behavior exhibited by their youth.

The Surrounding Community

The research presented in this paper was conducted at three separate sites and in two separate school districts. Sites A and B are in District One, while Site C is in District Two.

District One

Four separate elementary school districts service the surrounding community. The district in which Sites A and B are located consists of three elementary schools and one junior high school. All are governed by a school board, one superintendent, and four assistant superintendents. Each school in the district has one principal.

The district is committed to excellence in its educational program It is the goal for each child to experience success in a school committed to teaching, learning, and caring. There is a high percentage of community involvement. One hundred percent of the parents/guardians of Site A and 98.3% of Site B make at least one contact with the students' teachers during the school year.

Approximately 32,000 people live in the community that surround Sites A and B. Of the 32,000 people, 93% are Caucasian, and 6% are Asian or Pacific Islander. The median age of the community is 41 years of age, and 55% of the adult population are college graduates. This is the highest rate among the surrounding communities. The median income is approximately $73,000, with less than 2% of the population below poverty level.

District Two

District Two is located in a town of 75,000 people. The town is considered to be a "bedroom" community with little industry, and it has commuter links to a major city by a train system and expressways. The majority of students have parents that are in professional occupations. The socioeconomic status is generally upper middle class, and the community as a whole is considered to be affluent. The town has historically been very supportive of the schools, which it has shown by 90% or better memberships in PTA groups, sharing of equipment and space by the parks and schools, and the passage of referendums to renovate all the schools in the district. This renovation will end with the Middle Schools at the end of the 1997-98 school year. In addition, the town boasts a library that is one of the largest in the state. The library has a book lending program to the schools, and it sends employees to the schools to share literacy events. Issues currently facing the town include an increase in drug use among the youth, safety concerns for young children at the local playgrounds, and the proposed construction of a high-rise in the downtown area, which would change the character of the central business district.

National Context of the Problem

"Most kids don't write very well" is the opening sentence in an article written for parents in Better Homes and Gardens magazine (Palar, 1995, p. 40). Much research on teaching writing was done in the middle to late 1980's by such people as Graves (1985), Calkins (1983), and Atwell (1984). Since then, in public schools around the nation, there has been a focus on writing, and it continues to be an area that needs addressing (Kirby, Latta, & Vince, 1988). Teachers are finding that slang expressions and colloquialisms are influencing the language of student's writing. On admission essays, colleges are finding the prose to be technically correct, but the content is uninspired and boring (Silberman, 1989). Students' written expression

shows a lack of voice (Fletcher, 1993). That is, it fails to reflect their energy, feelings, and personality. Colleges are often reteaching the writing process and businesses complain new employees cannot write clearly (Silberman, 1989).

Because writing is an important life skill, many states have put in place a state writing assessment for students in various grades. Some high schools have established writing grades for each subject along with the content grade, and Stanford Achievement Tests now have a section where a writing sample is expected (Student Report Card, 1997). The need for improvement of writing skills in students has led teachers to look at the writing process and their role in it.

Written language does not have the advantage of oral language to convey meaning. Oral language communicates messages not only with the words it uses, but also with tone of voice, rate of speech, and changes in volume. Written language, however, relies primarily on words. Children must develop a broader facility with words to enable them to communicate meaning effectively. Eller, Pappas, & Brown (1988) feel that instruction that has been traditionally centered on word recognition or narrow application of vocabulary has impeded children's ability to express ideas in written discourse.

Teachers all over the country are looking for help with teaching students to write (Frank, 1995). Many teachers are unclear about what the writing process is. Some need help balancing technical skills with freedom of expression and with discipline to finish a written piece. Written expression remains a difficult process to teach, to evaluate, and to encourage. Silberman (1989) relates that often teachers do not know how to teach writing, because they have not been taught. The emphasis in teacher education programs is on reading. There are fewer courses offered on the teaching of writing. Once in the classroom, teachers find that reading and math form the biggest part of the elementary school curriculum, and writing often can end up being lumped

into what is called Language Arts.

Many times, because teachers do not see themselves as writers, they find it difficult to teach the process to their students. Teachers do not feel a bond with their students as writers. Their own writing experiences do not affirm the process of writing or provide sufficient support for their students (Matthews, 1984).

The writing crisis is nothing new. As far back as the Civil War, teachers were bemoaning the fact that students could not write. In 1873, the president of Harvard University complained about students' poor writing, "bad spelling, incorrectness as well as inelegance of expression" and "ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation in writing..." (Silberman, 1989, p. 48). The following year, more than half the students applying for entrance to Harvard failed to pass the first written examination that the university instituted. One hundred years later, an article was written, entitled "Why Johnny Can't Write" (Sheils, 1975), and more recently, many states have begun to test the writing skills of their students, because of a concern for the lack of writing abilities.

The problem of poor writing skills in students has risen in all parts of the country. The writing process itself is complex and subject to individual interpretations. Reading and math scores can be tabulated to give a level of achievement, but with writing, one score that would define ability is difficult to obtain. The solution to helping students grow strong in their writing cannot be found in one or two areas, but as the literature has shown, interventions into various areas can help. It is these interventions that need to be explored more thoroughly.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

In order to document the extent to which students are experiencing obstacles in their writing, three methods of data collection were used at the beginning of the school year. These forms were a teacher survey, a student survey, and an observation checklist.

Teacher Survey

A survey (Appendix A) was designed to measure the teachers' perceptions of themselves as writers, as teachers of writers, and their students as writers. They were asked to select from the categories of Always, Sometimes, Never, and Wish I Did More. All K-5 teachers in each of the three sites were given the survey the first week of school, and they completed it within five days. Out of 59 of teachers given the survey, 40 responded.

The first section of this survey allowed teachers to respond to how they perceived themselves as writers. Table 5 shows the results of this section. A majority of the teachers (84%) replied that they enjoyed writing "always" or "sometimes." Furthermore, they considered themselves writers. Areas considered on the survey included writing letters or using e-mail, keeping journals, and thoughts of writing a novel. Most of the respondents communicated with e-mail or letters (88.5%), and a smaller percent (68%) keep journals. More than half (57.5%) of the respondents have thought about writing a novel, and a strong percentage (85.5%) easily find words to

express themselves. As much as the teachers enjoy writing, 88.5% have trouble getting started, and a little over half (62%) find that mechanics hinder their writing.

Table 5

Teacher Survey: Perception of Themselves as Writers

Questions	Always	Sometimes	Never	Wish I Did More
Do you enjoy writing?	16.5%	67.5%	5.5%	9.0%
Do you consider yourself a writer?	27.0%	51.0%	13.0%	8.0%
Is it easy to find words to use?	18.5%	67.0%	7.0%	5.5%
Do you have trouble getting started?	12.5%	76.0%	10.0%	0.0%
Do mechanics hinder you?	6.5%	55.5%	27.5%	0.0%

The second part of the survey asked the teachers to respond to questions that pertain to how they view themselves as teachers of writers. A significant percentage of the teachers surveyed (70.5%) reported that their undergraduate classes did not prepare them to teach writing. This result was consistent with the findings in the literature review. Despite the lack of undergraduate preparation, 88.5% felt confident in teaching writing, as indicated by the combined responses of "always" and "sometimes." This apparent discrepancy between a lack of undergraduate preparation and confidence could be explained by the fact that the teachers have attended workshops, taken postgraduate classes, or participated in staff development for writing.

A trend was seen in this section of the survey. Primary teachers (K-3) selected the "always" category more consistently than intermediate teachers (4-5) to questions about themselves as teachers of writing (Table 6).

Table 6

Teacher Survey: Perceptions of Themselves as Teachers of Writers according to Primary and Intermediate Level

Questions	Always		Sometimes		Never		Wish I Did More	
	P	I	P	I	P	I	P	I
Did you take undergraduate classes in writing?	5%	7%	40%	28%	45%	66%	10%	0%
Are you confident teaching writing?	36%	17%	44%	76%	4%	6%	16%	0%
Do students respond to your writing ideas or suggestions?	59%	6%	38%	94%	0%	0%	3%	0%
Do you let students follow their own direction in their writing?	22%	29%	74%	71%	0%	0%	4%	0%
Did you share your writing goals?	30%	41%	39%	41%	30%	6%	0%	12%
Does your schedule allow you to accomplish these goals?	18%	6%	64%	65%	9%	12%	9%	18%
Are your students involved in the writing process 3-5 times a week?	43%	47%	30%	41%	13%	6%	13%	6%
Do you use strategies to develop a writing-centered classroom?	36%	40%	55%	53%	0%	0%	9%	13%
Do you model writing?	63%	38%	33%	56%	0%	0%	4%	6%
Do your students share their work?	43%	40%	57%	53%	0%	0%	0%	7%

P: Primary I: Intermediate

The results indicated that primary teachers felt more confident than their

intermediate peers in teaching writing. They reported that their students responded to their ideas and suggestions. Furthermore, the primary teachers felt their schedules allowed them to accomplish their writing goals more often than in the intermediate grades. Continuing the trend, primary teachers also stated that they used strategies to develop a writing-centered classroom and modeled writing for their students more than their intermediate peers were able to do.

Because the teachers were invited to indicate their grade level, the survey was not totally anonymous. In interpreting this section, the researchers questioned whether or not an individual's professional integrity might have influenced the choice of a response. For example, a reply of "never" about modeling writing might be interpreted by the respondent as an admission of a professional weakness.

The third and last part of the Teacher Survey reflected the teacher's perceptions of the students as writers. The results are listed in Table 7.

Table 7

Teacher Survey: How the teachers saw the students as writers

Questions	Always	Sometimes	Never	Wish I Did More
Do students show eagerness?	15%	84%	0%	0%
Are students willing to put time into the writing process?	8%	70%	8%	12%
Does their writing have a rich vocabulary?	0%	79%	16%	4%
Does their writing reflect organization and flow?	4%	87%	4%	4%
Do mechanics and spelling inhibit them?	8%	76%	12%	0%
Do you feel most students are good writers?	17%	78%	0%	4%

Upon review of Table 7, the category "sometimes" was chosen significantly more than any other category. The researchers felt this could be attributed to the wording of the response categories. The words "always," "sometimes," and "never" were too narrow . One anonymous respondent commented that "the choices did not adequately reflect a place for her answers." The researchers concluded that the choices of "almost always," "frequently," and "seldom" would have been more descriptive and supportive of the problem statement.

Even though the wording of the response categories prevented a solid support for the problems statement, the numbers reflected that the teachers perceived that there were some areas of difficulty. According to teachers' responses, students consistently failed to use rich vocabulary to express themselves in their writing. They also did not exhibit a willingness to put time into the writing process, and their writing was lacking in organization and flow. Furthermore, 84% of the teachers reported that mechanics and spelling inhibited student writers. The students were also given a survey of their own to determine how they perceived themselves as writers.

Student Survey

The second form of data collection was a student survey (Appendix B) that asked the students in each researcher's class to rate themselves as writers. The students were asked to read and/or listen to statements about writing and then put a check under a column that signifies they agree with it (finger pointing up) or whether they disagree with the statement (finger pointing down). The students were given the survey during the second week of school , and it was completed during class time. The results of this survey are summarized in Table 8, and they are reported in percentages.

The results of the student survey indicated that many students have a positive outlook on writing. Three-quarters of the students like to share their writing with their

peers. Also, they perceive that their teacher gave them enough time for writing and that they know the steps to writing.

Table 8

Student Survey

Questions	Agree	Disagree
Do you enjoy writing?	77%	23%
Do you consider yourself a writer?	45%	55%
Do you write letters to friends?	47%	53%
Do you e-mail?	35%	65%
Do you keep a journal or diary at home?	40%	60%
Do you think about writing a book?	47%	53%
Do you have a pen pal?	18%	82%
Do words for your writing come easily to you?	32%	68%
Do ideas for your writing come easily to you?	58%	42%
Do you like to edit to make your writing better?	33%	67%
Does your teacher give you enough time to write?	83%	17%
Do you know the steps to writing?	70%	30%
Do you like the teacher to give ideas?	68%	32%
Do you prefer to make your own choices?	73%	27%
Do you like to share your writing?	72%	28%
Do you like suggestions to change your writing?	55%	45%

Even though there were some positive comments, the student survey reflected many of the obstacles to writing previously mentioned in the literature. For instance, while most enjoyed writing, a little more than half did not consider themselves writers.

The majority felt that words did not come easily as they write, and they did not like to improve their writing through editing. Likewise, they did not value the refinement and expansion necessary to improve their work. In summary, the obstacles seemed to come from a lack of confidence in themselves as writers, a difficulty with finding and choosing appropriate vocabulary, and an unwillingness to revise and edit. All these problems were noted in the literature review (Silberman, 1989). A writing sample from each student was then collected to determine if these obstacles were evident. The samples were evaluated using a checklist.

Observation Checklist

The third form of data collection was an observation checklist (Appendix C), which was used to describe students' approach to writing and to assess an initial sample of their work. The researchers completed the checklist during the third week of school. The observation checklist addressed four areas: vocabulary, mechanics, process, and environment. The students' writing was scored on a scale of one to five, with five showing strength. In the area of vocabulary, the researchers were looking for the use of specific parts of speech and evidence of imaginative language. The mechanics section encompassed capitals, punctuation, and format. The process skills section rated the students' ability to gather and organize ideas and to use topic and supporting sentences. Through teacher observation, the environment section was completed, as the students prepared their writing sample.

Using the observation checklist, the writing of 18 fourth graders was assessed at Site A. Most (94%) of the students scored in the lower range of the vocabulary section. Generic or common words were predominately used in the writing. Also noted was the lack of variation of words at the start of sentences. In the area of mechanics, the group scored well. Eighty-four percent began their sentences with capitals, and 78% ended their sentences with the correct punctuation. Although

more than half (67%) indented correctly, a significant number (28%) needed help with indenting paragraphs or with knowing where to begin the body of a letter to their parents.

In terms of process, almost three-quarters (72%) of the student writers scored in the middle range for staying on topic. A little over half of the students (56%) scored below that middle range, because the organization of the writing lacked flow. Thirty-nine percent had opening sentences scoring in the upper range, but 78% needed a closing sentence. Over half (55%) of the writing pieces were brief, lacking support or details. Only a few (22%) were written in a way that the personality or voice of the writer was evident. In regards to the environment, the observer found most students began writing in a timely fashion, after first brainstorming possible opening and closing sentences, as well as topics to include. Only a handful (17%) had difficulty starting, and therefore did not complete the assignment in a timely manner.

The students at Site B are in the first grade. As emerging writers, often using inventive spelling, 75% of the students displayed a use of nouns. The use of specific verbs was recorded as being 37.5%. There was no usage of adjectives, adverbs, or imaginative writing at this stage (0%). A majority of these first grade writers, 87.5%, demonstrated appropriate use of basic mechanics, although specifics, such as paragraph indentation and punctuation, could not be observed at this time.

The eagerness of the writers at Site B was marked by the environment more so than the process. Most of the students, 80%, participated in a peer conferencing exercise to brainstorm ideas. Seventy percent of the students used this experience to process and respond in writing with at least one word. Although 75% were observed to begin in a timely fashion, 87.5% readily asked for help. Only 25% of the student writers worked easily. Not surprising for first graders, 75% were willing to share their work at the end of the writing experience.

At Site C, 23 writing samples from special education students in grades second through fifth were evaluated. In the vocabulary section, 91% of the students received below the middle rating. The problems most noted were with repetition of words and the lack of any figurative or descriptive words. The sentences tended to start with the same words and follow the same simple pattern. With mechanics, 31% of the students scored in the middle or above. The ones who scored below the middle had the most difficulty with spelling and remembering to indent. When looking at the samples in terms of process skills, 75% scored below the middle range. Very few students (8%) showed any evidence of gathering ideas. Many students had topic sentences and supporting sentences, but they did not exhibit transitions or closings. The observation of the environment revealed that 83% of the students were not beginning or working in a timely fashion. Many groans and complaints were heard, and the students found excuses to postpone the completion of the work. No students used their peers to brainstorm or revise.

In summary, the Observation Checklist provided a baseline of information from which interventions can be planned and compared. The checklist also confirmed that many students are experiencing obstacles that are interfering with the production of a clear piece of writing, thus providing evidence for the existence of the problem.

The data collected supports that students are experiencing obstacles to writing in several ways. All three forms of data collected supported the need for a richer vocabulary in students' written work. Also, teachers and students indicated that the mechanics inhibited student writing. Furthermore, both surveys confirmed that components of the writing process, such as revision and organization, are barriers. The teacher survey overwhelmingly supported that there are weaknesses in the classroom writing environment which impede students' written expression. These results lead the researchers to investigate the probable causes of the obstacles.

Probable Causes

There are many probable causes that may lead to students having difficulty with written expression. The probable causes can be organized into four general areas: vocabulary, mechanics, process and environment.

Vocabulary

The vocabulary scores of students at Sites A and B, as measured by the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), have been significantly below expectations. At Site C, students are measured using the Stanford Achievement Test , and the results show a three year decline in vocabulary skills. This decrease in word knowledge could be a reason for students' writing exhibiting a limited vocabulary. In addition, students' writing may be inhibited by their inability to express ideas because of insufficient vocabulary skills. Mayher and Brause (1986) have stated that writing is dependent upon the ability to draw upon words to describe an event. Fletcher (1993) concurs that words are the most important tools with which the writer has to work.

Like most children in our country, the students at Sites A, B, and C spend a significant amount of time watching television. Fletcher (1993) states that the elementary and junior high aged student's vocabulary has shrunk to 10,000 words, as compared to about 25,000 words in 1945. He continues, "The mass media has helped to further tighten this noose. Popular print media draw from a small group of words; television, of course, draws from the smallest word pool of all" (Fletcher, 1993, p. 36). In addition to vocabulary, some authors suggest that mechanics can be a stumbling block to writing.

Mechanics

Graves (1983) relates that there is an overconcern by students with the conventions of writing (i.e., mechanics and spelling). He states, "Correctness is more important to them than the actual information or content. This intense focus on

correctness can indeed be another obstacle to their writing" (Graves, 1983, p. 87). In the highly motivated communities of the three targeted sites, such behavior has been observed. Students can appear to be reluctant to write until they are sure of the correctness of their work, which often reflect the expectations of their families. In a later book, Graves (1994) elaborated on this idea by saying that parent groups, especially in middle-and upper-middle-class communities, frequently express concern over inventive spelling and use of incorrect grammar. "Rarely do they complain about the inability of their children to formulate and express ideas in a clear and logical fashion" (Graves, 1994, p. 32). While the parents may be focusing on mechanics, teachers feel the need to help students work through the process of writing.

Process

The creation of a written piece has its own obstacles for student writers. For some students, the process comes easily, but for others, the process is complex. Hall (1988) explains this process as a series of steps, "...getting started, making discoveries about feelings, values, and ideas, even while in the process of writing a draft;...making continuous decisions...reviewing what has accumulated...anticipating and rehearsing what comes next...and finally revising" (p. 1). The observation checklist used by the researchers supported the idea that students have a difficult time getting started, and they resist taking the time to revise their work.

Further inhibiting written expression is the revising process. Not only do students dislike revising, they often do not know what revision is. Calkins (1994) states that students often believe revising is adding punctuation, changing or adding a word, when in fact, it is a reworking of ideas, while maintaining ownership of the piece. Silberman (1989) says revision is in the true sense a "*re*--vision" (p. 18). It is looking at it again and considering how to say it in a better way that will satisfy the writer, while capturing the audience. Given that students may be struggling with vocabulary,

mechanics, or process, the conditions of the writing environment may also impede student writing.

Environment

The quality of student writing often suffers because the writing process takes time. The teacher survey reflects that time is limited in the daily schedule for writing. Fletcher (1993) says that students need sustained time for writing, not just a five minute "journal write" (p. 72) the first thing in the morning. The teacher surveys support this frustration.

Other possible obstacles could include the students' fear of failure or ridicule by peers (Fletcher, 1993). Also, Hansen (1987) stated that the lack of opportunity for students to have choices about their writing could be another stumbling block for student writers. Similarly, a lack of undergraduate training in teaching writing (Silberman, 1989) could hinder the writing process for students. The responses on the teacher survey verified that many had not received sufficient undergraduate training.

In summary, many probable causes were mentioned in the literature and observed at the different sites. Some of the causes include low vocabulary scores on standardized tests, negative influence of television, overconcern with conventions, and time constraints within the classroom. In as much as the causes have been identified, the solutions can be examined.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

Current literature reflects an increase in the interest of teaching written expression and the importance of it. Many authors, who wrote about writing in the 70's, have continued to expand on the art of teaching writing, and they, among others, offer numerous solutions to obstacles facing young writers. The solutions offered address the areas of vocabulary, mechanics, process, and environment.

Vocabulary

A student's writing is a powerful communication tool. His writing is a source of enjoyment as well as a medium for expression. Words are an important tool used for this expression and communication. As any fine crafts person will attest, the quality of the product depends on the tools used to create the item. Whether it be a watercolor scene, a julienne salad, or a journal entry, efficient tools make the task easier and the final product more desirable. At any level, written communication is more effective when a depth of vocabulary and command of language is evident. It has been determined "...that the more words a child knows, the better his or her chances are for success with a particular piece of writing" (Danielson & La Bonty, 1994, p. 96).

Some activities that might enhance students' vocabulary could include published programs, such as Daily Oral Vocabulary (DOV, 1990) or computer programs designed to give practice with new and related words. Other possibilities for

improving vocabulary are drawing attention to words through analogies, rhyming, adjective books, and word walls. A large fund of words can be a very useful tool in communicating thoughts and ideas. It is a tool that has been found to be more useful than being good at mechanics.

Mechanics

With research providing a better understanding of the writing process, teachers are currently trying to put less emphasis on mechanics. Mechanics are the conventions of writing, such as punctuation, spelling and grammar. The Illinois Goals Assessment Program (IGAP) reflects this thinking in evaluating student writing, because it weighs the mechanics less than other areas. Other authors also feel that mechanics should not be given a great deal of attention during the writing process (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994) . Students should wait to deal with mechanics until the last stage of writing, which in most cases is publishing in some form (Haley-James, 1983). This is the point at which students should be helped to learn the rules for spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Then, they can be shown how these rules apply to the words and sentences the students have already created. Lessening the focus on mechanics in the initial stages results in students being able to participate in the writing process immediately and to work more independently throughout it. They do not have to keep interrupting their thoughts and flow to change punctuation or correct spelling errors (Blackburn, 1984). In other words, editing is best left to the final stages of the writing process. The process of writing is complicated enough, without having it stopped repeatedly to fix errors with mechanics.

Process

Graves (1994) has described this process of writing to be a series of stages. These stages include some variation of the following: prewriting, writing, rewriting, editing, and publishing. Students begin a piece by thinking about possible

writing topics and then put their ideas on paper. These ideas should be written in an organized way with support and details for interest and clarity. Refining and revising is the next step before checking for spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Finally, their writing piece is published and shared in some form.

Teachers realize they need to know more about teaching writing. They have begun attending writing workshops for skills and ideas. Across the nation, writing projects have been organized, and many are readily available on the Internet. One thing teachers have learned through the workshops is that they need to consider themselves as authors. Fletcher (1993) agrees with Graves (1994) that it is important for writing teachers to begin with their own literacy. Help given by colleagues in the area of teaching writing is invaluable. It is more effective than a specialist who comes in for a brief time and then leaves them on their own. Silberman (1989) says, "The best teacher of teachers is another teacher" (p. 64).

Literature suggests that the writing process can be enhanced by conferencing with teachers and peers (Atwell, 1991). In conferring with their peers, students get to talk about their writing, answer questions, and reshape ideas. Calkins (1994) feels that "conferring is at the heart of the writing workshop" (p. 223). The writing workshop begins when the students start thinking about their topic, and it continues when teachers meet with individual students about their writing. Just listening is vital to the student writer. Given that the writer is ready, the teacher can "try to extend what the youngster can do as a writer" (Calkins, 1994, p. 232). The teacher's role is also as a mentor and an encourager, who lets the student writer know how powerfully he can write. With an attitude of acceptance, the mentor helps him build on his strengths and helps him to see more in his writing than he sees (Fletcher, 1994). From the beginning, the teacher lets the children know that all ideas are acceptable. Judgments are not made that would discourage students from feeling comfortable and

secure enough to take risks. With these factors present in the environment, the writing process will unfold.

Environment

"For too long we have been told that the way to teach writing is to teach about writing: its forms, its grammatical parts, its conventions" (Wilkinson, 1990, p. 25). With research providing a better understanding of the writing process, teachers currently try to create a writer-centered classroom. A writer-centered classroom emphasizes using written expression to communicate ideas. Writing is an important part of all areas of the curriculum. Every day, students are encouraged to make entries into their writer's notebooks, journals, and learning logs. In such a classroom, process and environment are closely intertwined and interdependent. The process does not come alive unless the environment is conducive to it. In this type of environment, teachers strive to individualize, by meeting the developing writer at his place in the writing process. Teachers do this by having short lessons or small groups to instruct them in the skills and strategies needed to improve and enhance their writing.

Effective teachers help children to understand the durable power of their writing which "unlike speech, where the transfer of information stops when the speaker stops talking, writing lasts" (Graves, 1991, p. 62). Therefore, the challenge to educators is that of creating a rich environment resplendent with meaningful language, so that the young writer will "fall in love with words" and will develop the ability to write "with clarity and grace" (Atwell, 1991, p. 43). Rich language is modeled for the students through literature, picture books, story-telling, and poetry. Responses can focus on how the authors used descriptive language and on the precise words he used to create pictures in the mind's eye. By nurturing the needs of the writer, the teacher will help to create what Templeton calls "wordsmiths" (as cited in Weir, 1991). These are students who are "language users conversant with and excited about their use of

words as tools" (Weir, 1991, p. 11). Teachers can help students expand their expressive vocabulary by exhibiting an excitement about words and by highlighting interesting words that students use. They can assist students to add to their word banks through words-of-the-day, taken from content material and literature.

A further enhancement to the environment is providing sufficient time for the students to experience the writing process. It is imperative that the classroom teacher examines the amount of time students are given for writing. Graves (1994) advises that teachers rethink the way time is used in their classroom, and he recommends at least four blocks of time a week for writing.

Even though teachers have to make specific writing assignments to fulfill curriculum demands, research has shown that students will have a greater investment in their writing when given the opportunity to make choices (Hansen, 1987). When given options within an assignment, students are more empowered to follow a personal direction for the task and to think about what is important to them. Choice encourages them to translate personal feelings, experience, and knowledge into a written piece (Kirby, Latta, & Vinz, 1988).

In conclusion, as more and more teachers work with written expression in their classrooms, they are realizing the value of enhancing student writing by improving vocabulary and creating a writing environment. In addition, they are rethinking their attitudes towards the writing process in regards to themselves as authors. They are reflecting upon ways they are able to manage components, such as time for writing, and allowing for student choice.

Project Objectives and Processes

As a result of the implementation of writing interventions (i.e. technical and creative), during the period of September, 1997 to January, 1998, the targeted first through fifth grade regulary and special education students will demonstrate an

improvement in their written expression, as measured by student writing logs, student surveys, teacher observations, and checklists.

Process Statements

In order to accomplish the objective the following processes are necessary:

1. Create an environment that is rich in language.
2. Design settings that motivate the students to initiate the process of writing.
3. Provide opportunities for peer collaboration.

Project Action Plan

The following action plan was designed to implement the above three solution components. First, the researchers designed and will administer teacher and student surveys . These were written during the summer of 1997 and administered the first week of school. The purpose of these surveys is to assess the degree to which teachers and students perceive obstacles in writing. An Observation Checklist will also be used by the teacher researchers to document the pre-intervention attitude of the students as they begin and become involved in the writing process, as well as to evaluate student writing samples.

The interventions will be implemented in various ways at the three sites. Because of the different abilities and ages of students at the three sites, each researcher will be using different interventions depending on the needs of her students. Site A includes students in a regular education fourth grade classroom. The interventions will be administered by the researcher during daily integrated writing and language periods, approximately 45 minutes in length. At Site B, these interventions will occur within small groups of primary students on a daily basis. These sessions will be approximately 30 minutes in length and will be administered by the researcher. In Site C, direct instruction by the researcher will occur two times a week for 30 to 45 minutes each session. The targeted students are in the second, third, fourth, and fifth

grades, self-contained Learning Disabilities/Behavior Disordered classrooms. One additional 30 minute session will be planned by the researcher, but it will be monitored by the classroom teacher.

One component of the interventions is toward reducing the obstacle of limited vocabulary in student writing. It is to create a language rich environment for the students. The purpose of this intervention is to expose the students to a variety of words, so that they can improve their understanding and promote clearer expression of thought. The following vocabulary activities are meant to add to the students' bank of words, with the objective of enabling them to make connections and express themselves more clearly and precisely.

Vocabulary enriching activities in which the students will be involved include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Making adjective books, with the words organized by quantity (few, many, several, etc.), size (huge, tiny), and other attributes.

2. Making word walls, with words displayed that show synonyms, opposites, descriptions or words related to a specific topic.

3. Having the students act out vocabulary words from their reading or other subject areas.

4. Listening to rhyme and description in poetry.

5. Drawing idiomatic expressions (i.e. raining cats and dogs) for display or assembled in a book.

6. Creating mobiles or other art projects (i.e. chain of ghosts with "spooky" words written on them) that display vocabulary related to a topic.

7. Brainstorming words related to content area (i.e. for science-stars, solar system, distant, bright etc.)

8. Participating in a Daily Oral Vocabulary program (DOV,1990) which offers

students a daily opportunity to "play with words and sense their magic" (p.3). Each day students explore words through activities such as one of the following: finding synonyms and antonyms, solving analogies, using exact words, recognizing context clues, and identifying related words.

In regards to the mechanics obstacle that student writers experience, the intervention will be to reduce the emphasis on punctuation and spelling. The desire of the researchers is for the students to focus on ideas and on expressing them precisely and creatively. Only in the publishing of a piece will there be a concern with editing.

In the desire to create an environment that helps students see themselves as authors, the researchers, will create settings which help students become personally involved in their writing. Examples of these interventions include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Using a "writer's notebook" to write down thoughts, ideas, responses, words, or phrases, for example. The notebook provides the springboard for writing pieces students may pursue.

2. Planning experiences that expose the students to literature rich in language and ideas that can be responded to either in conversation or in the writer notebooks.

3. Creating opportunities within the class for storytelling that allow students to orally tell about an experience or share an opinion in preparation for writing.

4. Allowing student choice for writing pieces, along with teacher directed writing assignments.

5. Designing settings to prepare the students for teacher assigned piece by use of props, literature, poetry, music, envisioning, or character enactment.

6. Developing graphic organizers to promote prioritizing ideas and encourage good sequencing and flow.

In the fourth intervention, the researchers will create frequent opportunities for

peer conferencing. These conferences can be as brief as five minutes. Students will use a peer conferencing sheet to share their response to a peer's writing piece. Writing conferences will be modeled by the researchers in the initial stages of the project. Students will have the option to begin conferencing with a peer or with small groups. Finally, whole group responses will be implemented. This procedure will be modified appropriately. For example, in the primary grades the "author's chair" is used so that the writer hears the response of the whole class.

At the end of the five month period, students will demonstrate improvement in their writing in areas of technique as well as desire. They will feel comfortable to seek out peers for writing or revision suggestions. They will exhibit a level of comfort about sharing their written work with others.

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of the interventions, student writing will be evaluated. In addition, an observation checklist will document writing desire, eagerness, and a comfortable use of the writing process. Finally, students will be surveyed again to determine any change in their attitude toward writing and how they view themselves as writers.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Interventions

The objective of this project was to reduce the obstacles students experience as writers. The implementations focused on creating opportunities to enrich vocabulary, design settings that motivate the students to initiate the process of writing, and provide opportunities for peer collaboration.

Creating Opportunities to Enrich Vocabulary

Activities to increase and extend vocabulary occurred in the three sites. For example students worked with word banks and analogies, created adjective books, and participated in other activities, which were intended to expand their writing vocabulary.

Site A. To expand their vocabulary, the fourth graders at Site A were introduced to the Daily Vocabulary and Daily Analogies Series. Each week had a particular vocabulary theme that helped the students strengthen their use of words through activities such as recognizing context clues or completing word webs. The Daily Analogy program gave the students two analogies each day to solve with words of their choice that completed the relationship appropriately. These were discussed as a group, and all possible words were listed.

In the content area of the curriculum, the students were expected to become an expert of a particular word. These could be geography or science terms, for instance. Each student would use a dictionary or text book to find the definition of his word and

then make a drawing for the word along with its definition. The experts taught the class as a whole or in a double-line drill format. There was follow up through discussion or vocabulary Bingo games. The drawings were hung up for display or assembled into a class book.

To encourage the use of rich language in speaking and writing, any word or phrase that was particularly descriptive was acknowledged. In writing, such words or phrases were highlighted, while in speaking, the listener would comment positively to a speaker.

Site B. The students at Site B imagined themselves to be knights and ladies of a "writing table." They were encouraged to use colorful words in their writing. These words were posted in a visible place (on the castle) during writing time for the purpose of assisting the young writers. Students got "points" for using colorful, descriptive words in their written pieces. In another activity, students' basic sentences were printed on tag board cards for use in a pocket chart. The words were separated in order to allow for more description or substitution of a more suitable word.

Students created a word wall on a large castle cut-out. They kept castle books with lists of castle words, or any words which the student perceived to be helpful in terms of his or her writing. Frequently used vocabulary words were printed on strips of paper for the creation of paper chains.

Site C. In Site C, the special education students in the second through fifth grades all worked on vocabulary improvement by such activities as making adjective books. These books were to be kept as a reference for later, when they would be writing sentences and paragraphs. To do this, the students worked in groups to brainstorm words according to the category the group was given. For instance, one group might have to come up with words that described how something feels; another group might think of words that describe feelings. The pages from each group were

copied, collated, and bound. Extra spaces were left on each page, so as the students learned new words, they could add them. The adjective books were kept in each student's writing folder.

In addition to the adjective books, all the students had lessons on identifying and naming synonyms. Each student was given a page with a picture of a trick-or-treat bag, on which was written a word that they had to look up in the thesaurus. As they found synonyms, the students wrote them on the bag and circled them in different colors to make them look like pieces of candy. Any new describing words were transferred to the adjective book. For other vocabulary building lessons, worksheets and games that emphasized opposites and category words were used. These words were practiced, so that the students would have familiarity with a wider vocabulary before being exposed to settings that would motivate their writing.

Designing Settings That Motivate Writing

The desire of the researchers was for the students to focus on ideas and on expressing them precisely and creatively. Therefore, the area of mechanics was purposely de-emphasized, but not entirely ignored. The conventions of writing were taught, and at the last stage of writing, were applied according to the level of the student.

In order to create a setting which encouraged writing, each researcher implemented strategies appropriate to her students. These included creative themes, the use of language rich literature, storytelling, and graphic organizers.

Site A. Site A students began the year by organizing a writer's notebook. Using a loose leaf notebook with a see through sleeve, each designed an original cover that included his name, the title "Writer's Notebook," and drawings depicting the student and his interests. Discussion followed in regards to looking at the world through the author's eyes, as well as the ways authors use their notebooks to jot down

ideas, words, and phrases. Ideas for writing topics were also brainstormed by the group. Each day students were given time to write in their notebooks and encouraged to take them home at the end of the day.

To expose the students to the language of published writers, picture books were read to the class. These were often followed up with a writing of their own in response to the book. Storytelling also played an important role in stimulating writing. This activity allowed students to "write" orally on different topics, such as "Acting Bravely," "Your Peaceful Place," "A True Story," or "I Shouldn't Have, But I Did." Sometimes these oral stories were written and added to their writer's notebook.

Site B. Students at Site B wrote character studies to accompany their castle theme. After listening to stories with medieval settings, they made knights and ladies books to describe some of the characters of the stories. Other students created their own characters with descriptions like "He was as strong as a horse" and "He was as brave as the bravest man in the world."

As an incentive to write and then read their own stories, students were given an opportunity to sit on a special chair (throne) in front of the castle for the purpose of reading their stories to their peers. Students wore crowns to signify the importance of reading their own creations.

Site C. The school district at Site C expected the students to write narrative, expository, and persuasive papers at levels appropriate to their grade levels. In addition, each child was expected to write a story. In preparation for each type of writing, the students were read several samples of the type of writing expected from them, and graphic organizers were modeled. Specifically for the narrative, excerpts from magazines were read, as well as examples of previous students' narratives. These papers were critiqued for what was good and not so good. For the expository, the students first demonstrated a "How-to" speech, and then they wrote about it for

publication. The persuasive paper was introduced by a "debate" between two teachers about school uniforms. The students rated the arguments as to their effectiveness.

To precede the story writing, the students were introduced to the main components of a story, and then they listened to how different authors developed mood and characters. Varying sentence structure and describing words were modeled. Students were encouraged to demonstrate before the class a sentence or two that showed a good way to describe a setting or a character. This was one part of another intervention of creating opportunities for peer collaboration.

Creating Opportunities for Peer Collaboration

At all three sites, opportunities for peer collaboration were implemented by the researchers. Initially, this involved modeling the kinds of comments that would be helpful in critiquing a piece. Students were shown how to compliment and offer suggestions and clarifications. Time was allowed for small group conferencing with peers to practice these skills. The allotted time was determined according to the age and abilities of the students. The sharing of individual students' writing was an important component at each site. The researchers provided frequent occasions for sharing with the whole class.

Site A. Collaboration at Site A took many forms. Brainstorming was used to create lists of writing topics or alternative words to use on a specific topic. For instance, words that could be used instead of "lucky" in a writing piece to follow up Dr. Seuss's book, Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are? were brainstormed.

As the students continued working on their writing, collaboration was experienced through peer, small group, or teacher conferences. The listener or reader told the author what was liked about the writing or asked questions for clarification purposes. Excitement for sharing created frequent opportunities to listen to each

other's writing, no matter at what point of the process the student writer was.

Site B. The emergent writers at Site B participated in basic opportunities for peer conferencing by first "Wribbling." Each student took notes (or scribbles), while his partner recited a story. The recorder then "reread" or recalled the story to the original author. That student then wrote and illustrated the story in a prepared book together.

In another activity, students wrote story-starter sentences, which were printed in a book for them. Each student had the opportunity to complete a story given an original idea from one of his classmates. After writing a piece to complete the story, students paired up with the originator. Students were encouraged to give one compliment about the story and one suggestion for improvement. They were also directed to look for specific details for editing, such as name, title, page numbers, and whether or not the story made sense.

Site C. At Site C, the second, third, and fourth graders worked in small groups to brainstorm ideas for their topics. They asked questions of one another to elicit more information, and sometimes they helped one another form sentences. The fifth graders, on several occasions, chose to use the state's writing criteria to offer advice to their fellow students for improvement. The fifth graders did not work in small groups. All the grades, however, shared parts or all of the finished products with the class.

The interventions were assessed by a variety of measures including a student survey and observation checklist.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

Two measures were used to evaluate growth in writing during the time the interventions were implemented at each of the sites. The Student Survey and Teacher Observation Checklist were administered at each site prior to the interventions and then again after the interventions.

Student Writing Survey

At the conclusion of the implementations, the 59 students at Sites A, B, and C were again asked to rate themselves as writers. The researchers compiled the results of the Student Writing Survey and compared the responses gathered prior to and after the interventions. The results are presented in Table 9.

Table 9

Student Survey

Questions	Pre	Post
Do you enjoy writing?	77%	90%
Do you consider yourself a writer?	45%	71%
Do you write letters to friends?	47%	67%
Do you e-mail?	35%	45%
Do you keep a journal or diary at home?	40%	60%
Do you think about writing a book?	47%	67%
Do you have a pen pal?	18%	66%
Do words for your writing come easily to you?	32%	69%
Do ideas for your writing come easily to you?	58%	81%
Do you like to edit to make your writing better?	33%	59%
Does your teacher give you enough time to write?	83%	84%
Do you know the steps to writing?	70%	88%
Do you like the teacher to give ideas?	68%	62%
Do you prefer to make your own choices?	73%	90%
Do you like to share your writing?	72%	81%
Do you like suggestions to change your writing?	55%	67%

The interventions appear to have had a positive effect on nearly all areas surveyed. Gains were seen in the students' perceptions of themselves as enjoying writing (+13%) and considering themselves writers (+26%). The students also felt words came more easily to them (+37%). A greater percentage of students are communicating through letters (+20%) and email (+10%). Only one percent more feel the teacher is giving them enough time to write. The only area reflecting a decrease was in the desire for the teacher to give writing ideas (-6%).

The students' writing skills were then assessed through observation. The results of the observation were intended to compare students'growth at each site with themselves.

Observation Checklist

The second measure used to evaluate growth in writing was the observation checklist. The researchers observed the same 59 students as they completed their writing assignment. They also used the checklist to evaluate the students' writing in regards to vocabulary, mechanics and process.

Site A. Thank you letters written by the fourth graders at Site A were assessed using the observation checklist. In general, a shift from the lower range (1 & 2) to the upper range (4 & 5) was apparent. In regards to specific nouns, all the students scored in the middle to upper range. Prior to interventions, the students scored in the lower range. Although the number of students using specific adjectives, verbs, and adverbs increased, the majority (47%) of the students scored only in the middle. An improvement was seen in the way the writers began their sentences throughout the letters. Many varied the beginning of their sentences rather than overusing words such as "then" or forms of "we." Once again, there was a shift from the lower end of the measure to the upper end. An increase in imaginative language was also noted as the writers' personality was more clearly evident in the post intervention letters. A little

less than half (44%) of the students scored in the middle to upper range in this area. In the pre-intervention writing sample it was reported that most scored in the lower range in use of imaginative language.

Although the area of mechanics was not emphasized it was an area of strength in both samplings. However, it is impressive to note that all the students (100%) began their sentences with a capital letter in the second writing sample. The majority of the students also used correct punctuation and only a few had a run on sentence.

The letters written after the interventions showed a marked improvement in regards to process. Only two letters lacked an opening sentence and all but one had a closing to the letter. One hundred percent of the writers stayed on topic and the majority (83%) of the students added two or three details to support their sentences. The letters were well organized and none of them sounded like just a listing of thoughts. In terms of environment it was observed that the students began work in a timely fashion and with enthusiasm. They worked in partners to brainstorm ideas to include in the letters before writing a letter of their own.

Site B. The first grade students at Site B demonstrated an increase in their use of basic vocabulary as they wrote a descriptive paragraph. The emerging writers showed a more frequent use of specific nouns (76.4%) and specific verbs (65%). A level of comfort with a variation of words and imaginative language was noted among certain students (17.6%). This had not been observed in the original samples. The first grade students at Site B were simultaneously learning to express themselves verbally and in written form. Their written vocabularies became apparent as students moved from labeling items on a picture to creating two or three sentences to express a thought or feeling. As emerging writers, they gradually responded to the thought of identifying a person, place, or thing as a noun, and willingly strove to include nouns in their sentences. Their understanding of the concept of a verb became apparent as the

students developed their action sentences. As the students' reading and writing abilities increased, so did the use of imaginative language in their own written pieces. The writing entries were personalized by everyday speech.

The mechanics of first grade writing centered around capitalization and punctuation. At the end of the intervention period, a majority of the students (70.5%) began their sentences with a capital letter, capitalized proper nouns (88.2%), and ended their sentences with correct punctuation(76.3%).

The attention to the mechanics of writing for these first graders was very basic. The primary goals of writing one's name at the top of the paper and using lines correctly for their letters progressed with the students' abilities to create sentences. Throughout the intervention exercises, most students increasingly demonstrated the use of capital letters in the beginning of a sentence and a period at the end of the sentence. Through inventive spelling, students frequently took the risk of attempting to spell unfamiliar words.

The writing process for first graders could be measured more tangibly at the end of the intervention period than at the pre-intervention time. A few students (8.5%) demonstrated an ability to organize ideas and to write the ideas in a fashion which represents the understanding of topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a closing sentence. More students (28.4%) stayed on their writing topic.

First grade writing samples can be characterized as being spontaneous, informal, personal, and most often, short. With these descriptors in mind, it is reasonable to conclude that most of the writers observed during the intervention period were developmentally appropriate in their abilities to process writing. In this case, the researchers were looking for the students' abilities to organize several ideas in a journal entry or science log, for example. Students developed the ability to stay on a topic when responding to a particular story or question.

Site C. At Site C, expository writing samples from twenty-three students were reviewed. In the vocabulary section, 30% were rated above the middle range, as compared to 2% in the range prior to the interventions. During the observation, the students were seen to be using word banks and adjective books to help them think of different words. While their rating of vocabulary usage increased, the reality was that the students relied heavily on support systems, such as word banks, lists of transition words, and the adjective books they had made early in the interventions. The use of these references resulted in a more varied repertoire of words than they had used previously, but still the vocabulary tended to be predictable and repetitious. Figurative language, such as idioms and similes, were infrequent (8%).

Even though the area of mechanics was not emphasized, 79% of the students scored above the middle range, as compared to 31% in this range at the beginning of the study. Once the Site C students saw the organization of their work on the writing webs, they began noticing patterns in sentences (capitals, indentations), and they began applying grammar and punctuation rules. Also, most students had the opportunity to publish their papers on the computer. With the organization the word processor gives, along with "Spell check," the students again improved mechanics. Without the "Spell check" feature on the computer, spelling errors were the most numerous errors.

When looking at the writing samples in terms of processing skills, a shift was seen from 75% of the students falling below the middle range at the start of the study, to 86% being above the middle range at the end. Before starting to write, most students wanted to brainstorm ideas together as a whole class. After that, most students relied on graphic organizers to record their ideas, and by doing so, they were rated as greatly improved at staying on topic, and at using topic, supporting, and closing sentences.

The observation of the environment revealed that 77% of the students scored an acceptable or above middle rating for starting work on time. This compared to 15% before the interventions. The students took out their materials and graphic organizers, and they began the process they had practiced numerous times. They completed their work in a timely fashion. Peer conferencing was non-existent (0%) at the beginning of the study. At the end, about 60% of the students were using it consistently, but they expressed a dislike of the activity. Revising of the written piece was rated at 0% before interventions, but rose to 56% after modeling and instruction. Again, most students expressed an unwillingness to change or add to what they had written.

From the ratings of the Student Survey and the notations from the Observation Checklist, a number of recommendations and conclusions can be made.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results were compiled from the three different sites, characterized by students of differing ages and abilities. The students at Site A were fourth graders, already experienced and skilled at many basic techniques of writing. The students at Site B were eager first graders, discovering the joy of communicating their thoughts in the written form. Writers at Site C were special education students in grades two through five, with a wide range of writing skills in place. The researchers concluded that the results would reflect this wide range of ability and performance among the targeted students, but some general conclusions could be made that encompassed all three sites.

Based on data collected in the Student Survey, the students rated themselves as enjoying writing more. Furthermore, an increased number considered themselves to be writers. The researchers believe that the attitude of the teacher was a great influence in this change. A positive, enthusiastic model showed the students not only how to be a writer, but also showed the interest and energy that makes a writer. In

addition, the researchers feel that the increased focus on writing throughout the week and across subject areas was influential in changing the students' self-perception of themselves as writers. The additional practice helped them become more adept at the skill and thus enjoy it more and see themselves as capable writers.

At the end of the interventions, the students had more confidence in making their own choices. The researchers concluded that this came about from two aspects of the interventions. First, the teacher modeled how an assignment could be varied to meet the goals of the task and also be made more interesting to the student. For instance, a goal to write a descriptive paragraph does not have to be about an assigned object. It can be about a person, an event, or a place. Second, the students also became more adept at making choices because of their practice with brainstorming topics and ideas in the whole group and in their peer groups.

The attitudes of the student writers toward editing were mixed, and the researchers felt that this could be related to their differing range of abilities. For the students at Site C, the graphic organizers and the frequent practice with forming topic sentences and supporting details were the backbone of their writing experience. The organization gave them an understandable pattern to help them find errors with their mechanics and also to see how sentences could be changed around. When the pattern became clearer, the willingness to change increased. However, the fourth graders at Site A displayed less willingness to edit their work at the end of the interventions, and the researchers felt this was due to the fact that the students' written pieces had become longer and thus more difficult to edit. Also, the writers had put more energy and thought into these original pieces and did not want to change them. Furthermore, a lot of writing was occurring across the curriculum, and the students were appearing overwhelmed by the quantity of written discourse expected of them.

It was found that the Observation Checklist that was used both before and after

the interventions tended to be subjective. Some terms were open to wide interpretation. These were such terms as "timely fashion" and "worked easily." Another aspect that made the checklist subjective was the attitude of the teacher/researcher. Each person had individual attitudes and expectations of the unique abilities of the students. What would be "willingly" or "timely" for one student, would be different for another. However, the checklist was useful for several reasons. First, it gave the researchers focus to the same goals, despite the differences in ages and abilities at the three sites. Next, the checklist helped define the process for all the targeted students. Last, it gave goals toward which the teacher could move.

It was also concluded that a checklist similar to the one used would be a useful tool to measure growth in student writing over a period of time. However, some modifications could be made. These might include sharing the goals with the student in the form of a rubric. This rubric would then be used as a monitoring tool for students and teacher. Another modification would be to use the rubric regularly, for the purpose of portfolio evaluation.

As was mentioned at the outset of the project, written language relies primarily on words. A broader facility with words enables children to communicate their meaning more effectively. Thus, instruction that gives a broader application of vocabulary is necessary to improve written discourse (Eller, Pappas, & Brown, 1988). Since the results indicated that the students were using more specific nouns and adjectives, vocabulary interventions were useful in improving written language.

Included in the interventions was more time for sharing. These were experiences that were enjoyed across all three sites. Part of the sharing and collaboration was to practice different aspects of the writing process. For some of the students, collaboration and sharing became as basic to writing as punctuation and capitalization. The fourth graders at Site A liked to share their finished piece, but they

greatly disliked peer editing. The first graders at Site B enjoyed all the steps to which they were exposed. The second through fifth graders at Site C were not successful at using the peer conferencing, because they were easily distracted and became judgmental. However, they liked reading their finished piece. More social skills training would be necessary before this group could use peer conferencing as a more useful tool in writing. Therefore, frequent opportunities for sharing should be continued.

Perhaps the greatest changes came within the researchers. The research goals gave a focus on an area of education that was interesting, but one that needed to be improved. The researchers wanted to be more competent in their teaching of writing. To that end, the action research led to trying things that would not have been attempted without defined focus. With the addition of new strategies, the researchers began to see many of the same things the students related in their checklist. For instance, the researchers began to see themselves as writers, and they enjoyed writing with the students more than ever. By writing and sharing along with the students, the researchers developed, at times, a different perspective on the world, a way sometimes of viewing the world as a writer might.

Self-satisfaction improved. Even if the researchers made a difference with only one child, the work and concentration would have been worth it. The fact that many students' attitudes reflected a greater sense of themselves as writers is very motivating.

At the conclusion of the interventions, the researchers felt that there were a couple of strategies that were especially helpful. The first of these was the increased commitment of focus and time to writing. To do so required taking time from other subjects. This selective abandonment did not cause the other subjects to suffer. Some were enhanced. The second strategy that was helpful was to create a climate

for writing before the assignments began. Creating a climate demonstrates a purpose for writing, and gives the students a chance to gain personal experience with the genres, vocabulary expected, viewpoints, and expected outcomes. It enables a student to learn how the world looks through the eyes of a writer.

If this project were to be extended, the researchers recommend that assessment tools that are less subjective be developed in monitoring progress and defining the needs of the students. Also, peer conferencing should not be used unless the students are socially skilled at working in pairs or small groups in a cooperative way. This would necessitate cooperative group practice over time to develop these skills. It would also include more structuring of the peer conferencing part of the process, as well as modeling it frequently to instill the desired outcomes. Finally, one is cautioned not to move too quickly through the writing process. Each phase of the writing needs sufficient time and practice to be established as a useful skill.

Suggestions for further inquiry might include looking into ways to structure classrooms, so that they can provide the most experience with writing. In addition, further inquiry should follow to determine what is the best way to experience all the steps in the writing process. This could include organization and management of the steps in the writing process to make sure all are experienced and understood.

Literature cited at the beginning of this research described some of the writing weaknesses to be in the areas of content, lack of voice (Fletcher, 1993) and clarity. Also, many students and teachers were unclear about the specifics of the writing process (Silberman, 1989) and did not see themselves as writers (Frank, 1984). The researchers feel that a continued commitment to the strategies started in this project would reduce the obstacles students and teachers experience. Assuming that the results would parallel the findings of this research, students at a national level would be expected to experience more success in their writing.

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APPENDIX A

TEACHER SURVEY

WRITING SURVEY

As researchers, we are interested in how elementary school teachers see themselves as writers and teachers of writing. In addition how they view their students as writers. Please respond to the statements below by checking the appropriate column (s).

YOURSELF AS A WRITER	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	NEVER	WISH I DID MORE
Do you enjoy writing?				
Do you consider yourself a writer? Do you write letters or e-mail? Do you keep a journal or diary? Have you thought about writing a novel?				
Do you easily find words to express yourself in writing?				
Do you have trouble getting started with your writing?				
Do the mechanics of writing hinder you?				
YOU AS A TEACHER OF WRITING Did you take undergraduate classes in writing?				
Do you feel confident teaching writing?				
Do students respond to your writing ideas or suggestions?				
Are you letting students follow their own direction in their writing?				
Have you shared your writing goals with your students?				
Does your schedule allow you to accomplish these goals?				
Are your students involved in the writing process 3 -5 days a week?				

	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	NEVER	WISH I DID MORE
Do you use strategies for developing a writing-centered classroom?				
Do you model writing for your students?				
Do your students share their work with others?				
STUDENTS AS WRITERS Do students show an eagerness and desire for writing?				
Are students willing to put time into the writing process (prewriting, revision, editing and publishing)?				
Does their writing demonstrate a rich vocabulary?				
Does their writing reflect organization and flow?				
Do mechanics and spelling inhibit them as they write?				
In general do you feel that most students are good writers?				

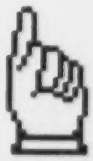
Please indicate grade level you teach: Kdg 1 2 3 4 5

Additional Comments:

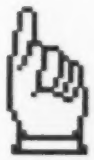
APPENDIX B

STUDENT SURVEY

STUDENT WRITING SURVEY

QUESTIONS		
Do you enjoy writing?		
Do you consider yourself a writer?		
Do you write letters to friends?		
Do you e-mail?		
Do you keep a journal or diary at home?		
Do you think about writing a book?		
Do you have a penpal?		
Do words for your writing come easily to you?		
Do ideas for your writing come easily to you?		
Do you like to edit or rewrite to make your writing better?		
Does your teacher give you enough time to write in school?		

STUDENT WRITING SURVEY

		
Do you know the steps to writing a good paper?		
Do you like the teacher to set the stage for writing or give ideas for you to write on?		
Do you prefer to make your own choices about what you write?		
Do you like to share your writing with others?		
Do you like to get suggestions from others to make changes in your writing?		

APPENDIX C

OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

Observation Checklist

	5	4	3	2	1
Vocabulary					
Specific nouns					
Specific adjectives & adverbs					
Specific verbs					
Variation of words					
Imaginative language					
Mechanics					
Paper is facing the right way					
Name and date in right place					
Indented paragraphs					
Sentences begin with capitals					
Proper names begin with capitals					
Sentences end with correct punctuation					
Comma after transition words					
Stayed in the margins					
Spelling is correct in the final draft					

Observation Checklist

	5	4	3	2	1
Process					
Evidence of gathering ideas					
Topic sentence					
Supporting sentences					
Transition words					
Closing sentence					
Stayed on topic					
Environment					
Used peer conferencing time for					
brainstorming ideas					
revising					
Began work in a timely fashion					
Worked easily					
Completed in a timely fashion					
Readily asked for help					
Shared work willingly					